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East and West :

A Summer's Idleness.

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By E. G. Chapman

EAST AND WEST:

A SUMMER'S IDLENESS,

—BY—

E. J. C.

"We look before and after,
And pine for what is not."



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This little poem was composed almost entirely during a brief holiday passed at a summer hotel on Kempenfeldt Bay, Lake Simcoe, in August of this year. To the friends whom he met there, the author dedicates it with all kind wishes.

TORONTO: October 31st, 1887.

THE PROLOGUE.

Art thou the old dream dreaming ?

Poor heart, of the morrow beware—

Death may lurk in the brown eyes' veil'd gleaming,

In the white throat so wondrously fair.

The tones that wild heart-throbs awaken—

The sheen of the gold-shower'd hair—

The touch that thy soul hath so shaken —

May lure thee, and leave thee—ah, where ?

Trust it not, the wild treacherous gladness—

The twin hounds of Passion and Pain

Are swift to arise—in their madness

They rend, and they rest not again !

The day-dream is sweet in the dreaming,

But dreamless the night's dull despair,

When the voice, and the touch, and the gleaming,

Have lured thee, and left thee—ah, where ?

EAST AND WEST.

"We look before and after,
And pine for what is not."

THE WEST.

The sultry day is well-nigh done,
Aflame is all the fiery west—
The giant snow-peaks, one by one,
Are crimson'd by the great red sun
Whose glory gilds each gleaming crest.
And far—upon the golden sky,
A black fleck floating silently—
A solitary eagle sweeps
Its way across those trackless deeps :
As trackless as a frozen sea
Whose waves have never stir nor sound
In all its weird immensity.
Below, the foot-hills stretch around
Mile after mile—untrack'd, untraced,
A desolate and dreary waste
Of shattered rock and clinging pine,
Deep-cleft by many a jagged line
Of lonely gulch and cavern hoar,
Where night is in the noon of day—
And months and years go on alway —
And still, as in the days that were,
Those western hills are wild and bare,
The eagle's home, the lean wolf's lair—
Unchanged, and changeless evermore !

But deep within—the rocky core
 Of those lone mountains, rent and old,
 Is seam'd and vein'd with glittering ore,
 And lurid with the gleam of gold.
 So, to those savage wilds have come
 A few wrecked souls, as savage. Some
 By the fierce gold-thirst thither led,
 And some from human vengeance fled,
 And some world-chased by bitter wrong—
 Rough, reckless, bearded, bold, and strong—
 They come from far-off lands and climes,
 But little speak of earlier times,
 Each living as it seems him best,
 Alone, and heedless of the rest.

The daylight softly ebbs away,
 Though lingering still with tender ray,
 And still the sunset's waning glow
 Climbs slowly up those wastes of snow :
 But here and there faint stars are seen
 In the blue gaps that lie between
 The glimmering peaks, and all below
 Is gray with creeping mist. The stroke
 Of restless pick, whose rhythmic clang
 All day among the mountains rang
 And many a wild weird echo woke,
 Is silent now ; but yet no sound
 Or stir of life is there reveal'd
 Among the scatter'd huts around.
 To-night they linger long a-field,
 Those toilers of Earth's stony womb—
 But now, slow-growing through the gloom
 Dark forms in shadowy groups appear :
 And two among them gently bear
 A human burden—ghastly, wan,
 And black with powder-—one in whom
 The likeness of a living man
 Is well-nigh all crush'd out. And they,
 Those hard rough miners—tender now

As very women—softly lay
 With silent footsteps, sad and slow,
 Their comrade in his lowly hut,
 Where gaunt and grey the rocks out-jut
 Across the jagged rift below.

He wakes again to life at last,
 But not to consciousness or pain—
 The throb of agony has pass'd
 Though life doth still awhile remain.
 And they, who stand beside him there
 And bathe with rough but pitying care
 His blood-stain'd breast and fever'd brow,
 He knows them not—his spirit now
 Is far away from that lone spot
 In scenes long-left, but unforgot—
 A stately terraced walk he sees,
 Pale-tinted by the crescent moon :
 The odour of the summer breeze,
 The whisper of the swaying trees,
 Falls softly on his soul—and soon
 A clinging form is by his side—
 Their lips are one—the whole world wide
 Has not so fair a form for him—
 His heart beats fast, his senses swim
 Under her whisper'd words. Alas !
 That such should be, and come, and pass,
 Even as the wind that stayeth not.

Well may the listeners shrink—God wot !
 A laugh from dying lips to hear :
 In sooth, it hath a ghastly sound
 That well may cause a throb of fear
 In hearts as bold as those around—
 And bitterly, though faint and low,
 From those pale lips the accents flow :

I told thee, when thy fantasy
 Had sicken'd and had ceas'd to be—

When thou, unmoved, my name couldst hear,
 Or hear it with a shrinking fear—
 When hand met hand, and no quick thrill
 Came, as of old, thy heart to fill—
 And that one memory had become
 A blear'd ghost, wan and wearisome—
 Thou hadst but one brief word to say,
 Or look—and I no more would blot
 The brightness of thy life's young day,
 But drop from out that life away,
 And be as thou hadst known me not.

I told thee, when the thing was said,
 I would go down without a cry—
 A bubble—and the wave goes by,
 And all the past is blurr'd and dead.
 Why should I curse thee? All around
 The dead leaves drop. The wintry ground
 Is bare and black, that once was green—
 The song-birds of the summer's sheen
 Where bleak winds blow no more abide—
 All life's poor glammers wax and wane—
 Then how shouldst thou unchanged remain,
 In all this change of time and tide !

The damp of death is on his brow,
 The flame but feebly flickers now—
 A struggle for the strangled breath,
 A gasp that faint and fainter grows :
 And then the long, deep, calm repose,
 The one long hush of death !
 They draw the hood across his face,
 And leave him to his Maker's grace !

THE EAST.

(ONE YEAR LATER.)

Blithe, and bright, and debonair,
Is Deercliffe Court this afternoon—
The roses in their flush of June
On terrace, lawn, and gay parterre,
In glowing masses fill the air
With summer fragrance. All around
Fair forms are floating, and the sound
Of light patrician laughter blends
With faint-heard strains of melody—
And friends are gaily greeting friends—
And warm and bright the summer sky
Its cloudless azure dome extends
O'er all that courtly company.

Within the vast ancestral rooms,
The noble hosts of Deercliffe stand,
With winning smile and ready hand
To greet their throng of guests. Rich glooms
Upon the blazon'd arras throw
On Parian groups their purple glow :
And bowers of tropic plants, between,
Roll back the sunlight's rippling sheen :
And high above, in long array,
Steel-coated warriors grim and grey,
And ermin'd judges, stern and cold,
And plum'd gallants, gay and bold,
Who many a roaring catch had troll'd
In those old halls, in days that were ;
And maidens in their bloom of May,
White-throated, with their pearl-deck'd hair
And poor dead smiles, long pass'd away,
Look down upon as bright a scene
As in those halls hath ever been.

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She stands beside a marble fawn,
 Gold-crown'd above her low pale brow
 With sun-flush'd tresses, and a glow
 On lips and cheek of pearly dawn.
 Lithe as a tawny lioness,
 Her form has still, in its slim grace,
 A girl's young beauty. One may trace
 In all its swaying loveliness
 The natural pose and pride of race
 Subdued by inborn tenderness.
 Her picture : you may see it there—
 It hangs upon the southern wall
 Among the rest, more fair than all,
 With its great waves of tawny hair,
 And tender mouth, and gold-brown eyes
 Wherein a wistful yearning lies.

Beside her stands the noble Earl,
 In act and instinct, to the core,
 True to his rank, if nothing more :
 All coldly courteous. In the whirl
 Of public life, no passing blame
 Had ever touched his ancient name.
Noblesse oblige, his motto ever :
 And so he held without endeavour
 The world's respect, his peers' esteem,
 His young wife's love—well, so 't was said—
 But love, the passion and the dream,
 Scarce troubles now a young girl's head.
 What, if without our world it lies—
 Shall hearts for that be void and sore ?
 Rank, wealth, world-homage won—what more
 Is wanted for a paradise ?

Gay goes that garden festival !
 Around, the glorious roses glow ;
 Their fanfares gay the bugles blow ;
 The tennis-lawns and pathways all

Are bright with beauty and the gleam
 Of radiant gems and silk and lace,
 And many a memory-haunting face.
 Within the rooms, in dazzling stream
 (Fit pageant for a painter's dream)
 The guests move onward. Some have pass'd
 With their young hostess, free at last,
 Through all the glittering living maze,
 Within the noble gallery,
 Where paintings of the old art-days—
 Of Rubens, Titian, Veronese—
 Rank upon rank, unbrokenly,
 Enshrined in deathless glory, shone—
 With many of our modern day,
 Fit co-mates—so the world will say,
 When Time's slow touch shall o'er them stray,
 And mellowing years have come and gone.

A passing group has paus'd before
 A strange weird painting—done by whom
 None knew—its legend only bore
 The picture's name: "a lonely tomb."
 So fraught the scene with sense of pain,
 That many a passer turns away:
 But those who stop, perforce must stay,
 And look, and lingering, look again.
 A sunken cross—the sea—the shore—
 A levelled sand-heap—nothing more
 To tell the lonely sleeper's tale—
 A grave beside a storm-blown sea,
 And on the land, nor leaf, nor tree,
 And on the sea no gleam of sail
 Or glint of wild bird's restless wing,
 Or sight or sign of living thing—
 A scene that doth the soul oppress
 With its wide utter loneliness.

Between the lines the tale is read,
 A voice amidst the silence said—

Certes! the scene is sad and drear ;
 But in the Western wilds, last year,
 I came across a scene as dread,
 A grave as silent, lost, and lone—
 The cloven ice-cliffs overhead,
 And shatter'd rocks around it thrown !
 In truth, a strange titanic tomb
 Whose walls were never built or plann'd
 By human skill or human hand—
 But in their silence wide and dread,
 Those walls will hold their lonely dead
 Close-curtain'd till the crack of doom !

They turn'd—and in the speaker knew
 A soldier and a traveller too,
 A paladin of high renown
 In all the most exclusive sets :
 One met to-day in ducal halls,
 At midnight crushes, masques, and balls,
 Then heard of in some far-off town
 Among the moslem minarets—
 Or where the Calmuck deserts lie
 In their untamed immensity—
 Or pillar'd date-palms stately stand,
 Green islands in a sea of sand,
 Within the Nubian's burning land—
 Or where the wide Marañon flows,
 And forest upon forest grows,
 And Cotopaxi's gleaming snows
 Are white against the Western sky !
 All gathered round, and eagerly
 The Colonel question'd—what and where
 Was that strange tomb of which he said ?
 And who was he, the lonely dead,
 Who slept his last long slumber there ?

And so his tale the traveller told :
 Last year, he said, when western woods
 Were flush'd with autumn's red and gold,

I cross'd the rocky solitudes
 Among the cloud-girt mountain chains
 That rise from Arizona's plains,
 By sombre gorges deeply cleft,
 Where Time's denuding hand has left
 Stern record of his patient toil,
 And hurrying streams in wild turmoil
 Leap darkling to the distant sea.
 And there, in those far wilds, did we—
 I, and my silent Indian guide
 And our brave mules—climb patiently,
 Until one sultry eventide,
 Slow toiling up the mountain side,
 Across a miners' camp we came :
 The topmost peaks were still aflame
 With the red sunset's dying glow,
 But all was grey and dark below.

And in the camp there was no sound
 Or stir of life ; but all appear'd
 Lone and deserted, till we near'd
 A distant hut in which we found
 The miners gathered, mute, around
 A dying comrade. As I gazed
 Upon the dying face, its eyes
 Turn'd upon mine with sad surprise
 In their last lingering look. Amazed,
 I stood, till memory found the clue,
 And then the poor dead face I knew—
 Poor Geoffrey ! everybody's friend !
 Who thought that such would be his end ?
 Countess ! I think you knew him, too :
 Young Geoffrey Vernon ! Was it not
 At Deercliffe—at this very spot,
 I met him once, two years ago ?
 With sudden effort she suppress'd
 The wild fierce throb that tore her breast,
 And turn'd, and slowly answer'd—No !

I do not think it !—all the same,
 I do remember, now, the name—
 I pray you, let us hear the rest.

Her voice was hard, and strange its tone,
 As voice of one that would subdue
 A moan's low cry. A livid hue
 Came o'er her cheek, and then, anew,
 As quickly as it came, was gone—
 Unseen, unheeded. And again,
 With voice that held no touch of pain,
 She said, I pray you, then, say on !

Well, there is little more to say—
 I kept the death-watch till the day
 Came greyly, and the stars were gone.
 Then follow'd the strange burial :
 The strangest that has ever been
 Before or since, or ever shall
 In all the coming years be seen.
 The hills above the camp, that night,
 Threw back a lurid spectral light :
 And suddenly among them shone
 A sofatara's fiery cone,
 Between the fissured rifts upthrown.
 And with the dawn, a seething flood
 Of pitch-like, black, and trailing mud
 Pour'd from its throa' and forced its way
 Far down the narrow gorge that lay
 Darkly beneath it. There they placed
 (Within a few rough boards encased)
 The body of the silent dead.
 And one they call'd " the preacher " there,
 Uncover'd, and with low voice said
 A few scant words of hurried prayer.
 Then came the wave : a moving wall,
 It crept around the coffin-lid,
 And rose and rose—and all was hid
 Beneath its black and massive pall

That froze to solid rock, anon !
 And ever as the years roll on
 The secret of that silent stone
 Lock'd darkly in its hidden core—
 The goad that drove its tenant forth
 From home and kin, o'er sea and earth,
 To perish there—remains unknown,
 And so remaineth evermore !

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It seem'd as though the cruel day
 Would never end—and all the while
 To force upon the face a smile,
 And this and that, O God ! to say,
 Whilst all the thought was far away—
 And all the glitter and the gleam,
 The greeting forms that came and went,
 Seem'd but the glamour of a dream
 That work'd to her bewilderment.
 But now at last the day has pass'd,
 The lingering, gleaming, ghastly day—
 The carriages have roll'd away—
 And she is free—at last—at last !

* * * * *

She stands alone within her room—
 The night has come : the moon, on high,
 Sails softly through the summer sky—
 The floor is flecked with light and gloom—
 The glory of her loosen'd hair
 Is all about her—white and bare
 Her shoulders and her white feet shew
 Like marble in the pale moon-glow.
 And light as one that moves in dream
 She seeks the costly cabinet
 Wherein her rarest jewels gleam,
 And stooping, wildly takes from it
 A few poor letters—three or four,
 She had not dared to treasure more—

And these, why keep them now, she said :
To keep them were a bitter jest
On this great lie of life, at best,
And here they do but mock the dead !

No need has she to scan again
Those words of passionate power and pain,
That branded were in heart and brain.
One lingering, clinging kiss—the last—
And through their leaves the swift flame pass'd,
And the grey ashes, one by one,
Dropt silently, and all was done.
But as the last gleam o'er them swept,
Through all her soul a terror crept
And shook with sobs her shuddering breast—
Her hands across her eyes she press'd,
But that dead face she needs must see—
And all the yearning Past is there—
And low she moans, in her despair,
O Jeff ! poor Jeff !—it *had* to be !



